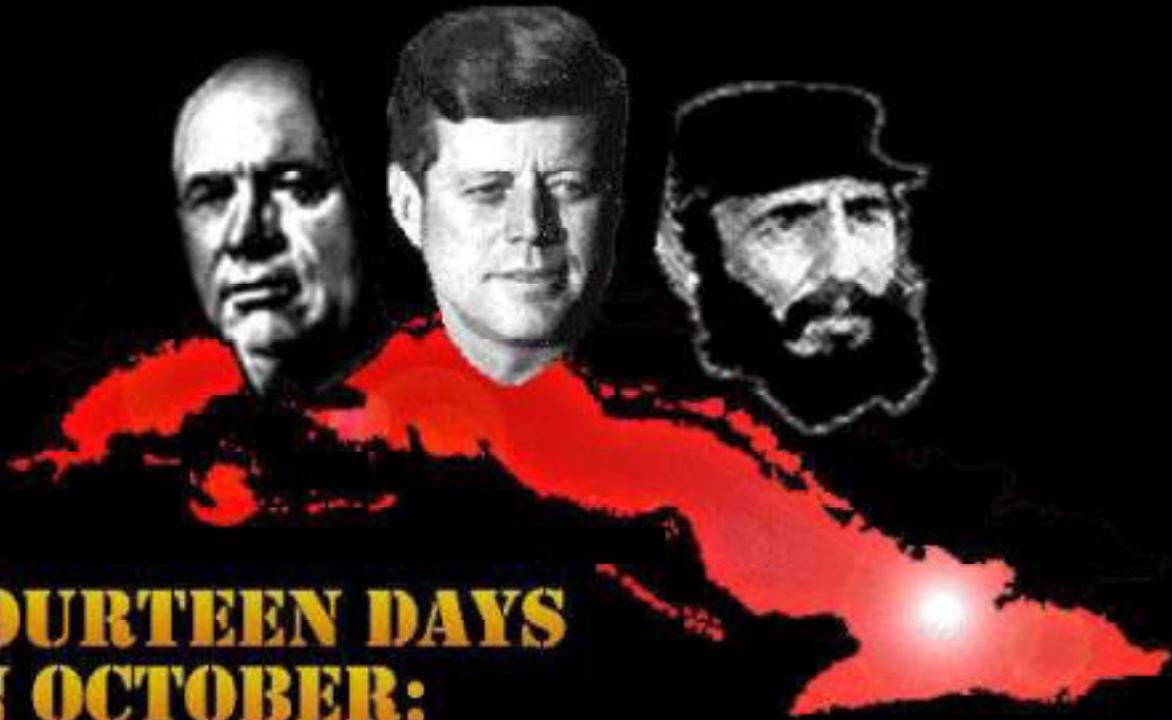


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**FOURTEEN DAYS
IN OCTOBER:
THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS**

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Introduction

An Overview of The Crisis

“Nuclear catastrophe was hanging by a thread ... and we weren’t counting days or hours, but minutes.”

**-Soviet General and Army Chief of Operations,
Anatoly Gribkov**

The Cuban Missile Crisis was the closest the world ever came to nuclear war. The United States armed forces were at their highest state of readiness ever and Soviet field commanders in Cuba were prepared to use battlefield nuclear weapons to defend the island if it was invaded. Luckily, thanks to the bravery of two men, President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev, war was averted.

In 1962, the Soviet Union was desperately behind the United States in the arms race. Soviet missiles were only powerful enough to be launched against Europe but U.S. missiles were capable of striking the entire Soviet Union. In May 1962, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev conceived the idea of placing intermediate-range missiles in Cuba. A deployment in Cuba would double the Soviet strategic arsenal and provide a real deterrent to a potential U.S. attack against the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, Fidel Castro was looking for a way to defend his island nation from an attack by the U.S. Ever since the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, Castro felt a second attack was inevitable. Consequently, he approved of Khrushchev’s plan to place missiles on the island. In the summer of 1962 the Soviet Union worked quickly and secretly to build its missile installations in Cuba.

For the United States, the crisis began on October 15, 1962 when reconnaissance photographs revealed Soviet missiles under

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▲ John F. Kennedy



▲ Nikita Khrushchev

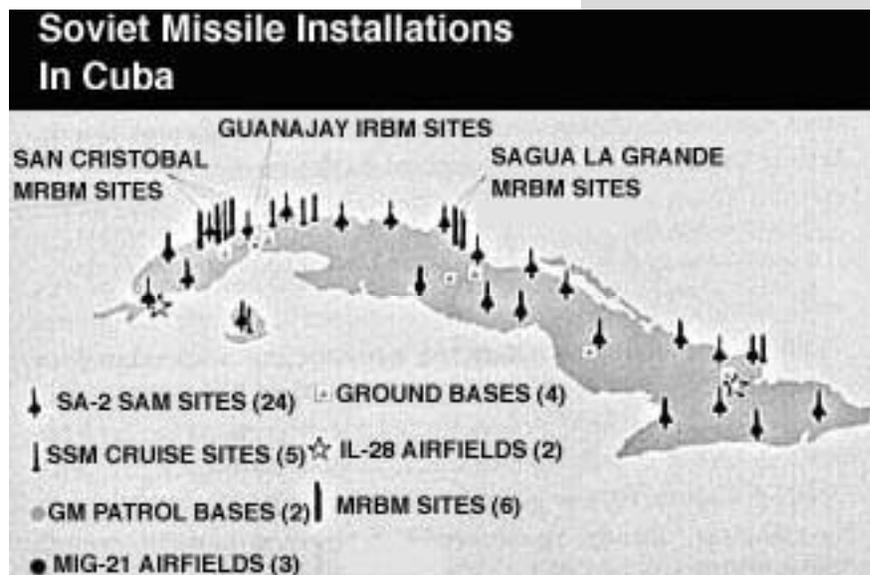
contrsuction in Cuba. Early the next day, President John Kennedy was informed of the missile installations. Kennedy immediately organized the EX-COMM, a group of his twelve most important advisors to handle the crisis. After seven days of guarded and intense debate within the upper echelons of government, Kennedy concluded to impose a naval quarantine around Cuba. He wished to prevent the arrival of more Soviet offensive weapons on the island. On October 22, Kennedy announced the discovery of the missile installations to the public and his decision to quarantine the island. He also proclaimed that any nuclear missile launched from Cuba would be regarded as an attack on the United States by the Soviet Union and demanded that the Soviets remove all of their offensive weapons from Cuba.

During the public phase of the Crisis, tensions began to build on both sides. Kennedy eventually ordered low-level reconnaissance missions once every two hours. On the 25th Kennedy pulled the quarantine line back and raised military readiness to DEFCON 2. Then on the 26th EX-COMM heard from Khrushchev in an impassioned letter. He proposed removing Soviet missiles and personnel if the U.S. would guarantee not to invade Cuba. October 27 was the worst day of the crisis. A U-2 was shot down over Cuba and EX-COMM received a second letter from Khrushchev demanding the removal of U.S. missiles in Turkey in exchange for Soviet missiles in Cuba. Attorney General Robert Kennedy suggested ignoring the second letter and contacted Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to tell him of the U.S. agreement with the first.

Tensions finally began to ease on October 28 when Khrushchev announced that he would dismantle the installations and return the missiles to the Soviet Union, expressing his trust that the United States would not invade Cuba. Further negotiations were held to implement the October 28 agreement, including a United States demand that Soviet light bombers be removed from Cuba, and specifying the exact form and conditions of United States assurances not to invade Cuba.



▲ Fidel Castro at the United Nations



Causes of the Crisis

The Soviet decision to deploy missiles in Cuba can be broken down into two categories: 1) Soviet insecurity, and 2) the fear of losing Cuba in an invasion.

Soviet Insecurity

During his presidential campaign, Kennedy had repeatedly spoken of a missile gap between the U.S. and Soviet Union. Despite being briefed by the Pentagon that the U.S. had more missiles than the Soviets, Kennedy maintained his claim that the U.S. had less. After the 1960 election, Khrushchev began to test the new president. In the summer of 1961 Khrushchev applied pressure to Berlin and eventually built a wall surrounding West Berlin. In response, the Kennedy Administration felt it necessary to reveal to Khrushchev that there was in fact no missile gap. Khrushchev had always known the U.S. had more missiles but now he knew that the Americans knew. Khrushchev also knew that Soviet missiles were only powerful enough to be launched against Europe but U.S. missiles were capable of striking the entire Soviet Union.

Additionally, Khrushchev felt like a man boxed in by enemies. For example, he cited the U.S. missiles in Turkey just 150 miles from the U.S.S.R. Cuba was only 90 miles off the coast of Florida but the 60 mile difference was “nothing for a missile,”

Khrushchev said. Most of all, however, Khrushchev feared a first-strike by the U.S. If the Soviet Union lost the arms race so badly, he worried, it would invite a first-strike nuclear attack from the U.S.



▲ Important locations in Cuba

Consequently, Khrushchev began looking for a way to counter the United State's lead.

A Cuban Invasion

“If I had been a Cuban leader at that time, I might well have concluded that there was a great risk of U.S. invasion.”

-Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara

The second of the two major causes was Cuba's fear of invasion from the U.S. Since he had come to power in 1959, Cuban Premier Fidel Castro was aware of several U.S. attempts to oust him. First, was the failed Bay of Pigs invasion by CIA-backed Cuban exiles in 1961. Second, was a U.S. military exercise in 1962. The Armed Forces conducted a mock invasion of a Caribbean island to overthrow a fictitious dictator whose name, Ortsac, was Castro spelled backwards. Additionally, the U.S. was drafting a plan to invade Cuba (Operation Mongoose). The mock invasion and invasion plan were devised to keep Castro nervous. Finally, the CIA had also been running covert operations throughout Cuba trying to damage the Castro government. Consequently, Castro was convinced the U.S. was serious about invading Cuba.

The Build-up Begins

“Why shouldn't the Soviet Union have the right to do the same as America?”

-Nikita Khrushchev

In April 1962, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev conceived the idea of placing intermediate-range missiles in Cuba. A deployment in Cuba would double the Soviet strategic arsenal and provide a real deterrent to a potential U.S. attack against the Soviet Union or Cuba. Khrushchev promoted the KGB station chief in Cuba Alexander Alexeev to Ambassador to negotiate for Castro's approval of the plan. Castro did not openly reject the idea at first, but instead he gave it serious consideration. Believing it better to risk a great crisis than wait impotently for an invasion, Castro accepted Khrushchev's offer. In mid-July of 1962 the Soviet Union began its buildup of offensive weapons in Cuba.

The Secret Build-Up

Throughout the late-summer and early-fall of 1962 the Soviets ferried launch equipment and personnel necessary for the preparation of missiles to Cuba. For fear of being discovered, they could not use military ships. Therefore civilian vessels were used. In one instance, troops rode on a cruise liner posing as tourists. In all, sixty missiles and their war-heads were transported to Cuba.

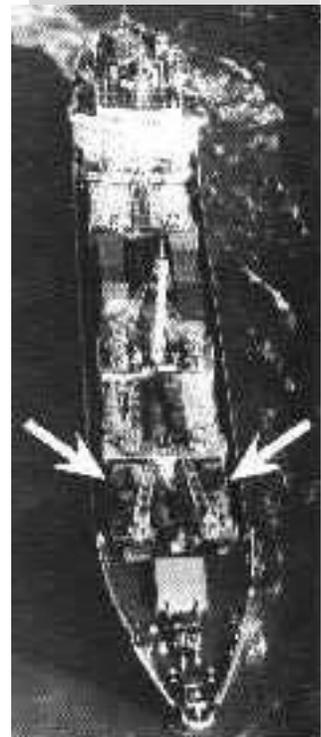
As the U.S. monitored the increased shipping activity to Cuba, rumors began to circulate in Washington. On August 10, 1962 John McCone, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, sent the president a memorandum indicating his belief that the Soviets would place

medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) in Cuba. On the 29th, a U-2 reconnaissance flight over Cuba revealed the presence of SA-2 SAM (Surface-to-Air-Missile) sites. In an attempt to reassure the Congress and the public, Kennedy announced on September 4 the presence of Soviet defensive missiles in Cuba (SA2-SAMs), but stated that they were no offensive weapons. On the same day, Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin assured Attorney General Robert Kennedy that no offensive missiles would be placed in Cuba. Eleven days later, however, the first Soviet MRBMs arrived. Under increasing pressure from Congressmen and intelligence officers, Kennedy ordered another U-2 flight over Cuba for October 9.

Due to bad weather the flight was delayed until Sunday, October 14. Richard Heyser took off in a U-2 from Texas and headed over Cuba. When he landed in Florida, a one-star general was there to receive the film. Heyser, a veteran pilot, immediately sensed something urgent—one-star generals do not normally run errands.



▲ As this picture demonstrates there was clearly a close relationship between Castro and Khrushchev.



Discovery

Day 1: Monday, October 15

“If there was ever a time I want to be right in my life, this is it.”

-Arthur Lundahl, Director of the National Photographic Interpretation Center, upon analyzing the photographs of the missiles

After analyzing the pictures from the Heyser flight, the National Photographic Interpretation Center found what they thought were more surface-to-air missile sites. Closer inspection revealed, however, six much larger missiles — each 60 to 65 feet long. What the photo interpreters had discovered were SS-4 nuclear missiles. They immediately knew it would involve the president.

For more information on reconnaissance see the Recon Room at: http://library.advanced.org/11046/recon/recon_room.html.

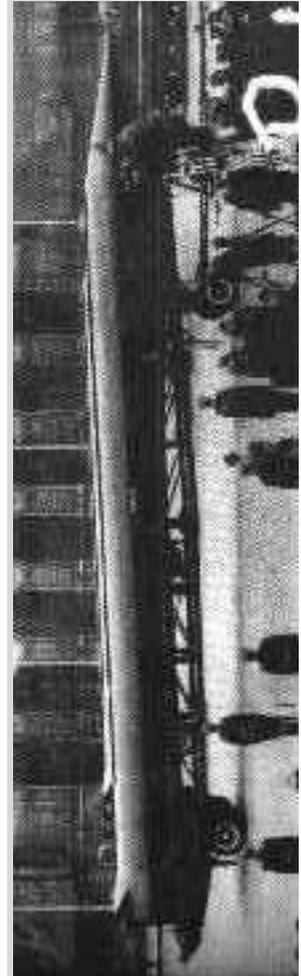


Day 2: Tuesday, October 16

“Mr. President, there is now hard photographic evidence that the Russians have offensive missiles in Cuba.”

-McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor

Still in his pajamas, President Kennedy was informed of the missiles in Cuba during his breakfast. He did not react, but it was now clear that for months the Soviets had purposely been deceiving the American president. Kennedy immediately took charge and scheduled two meetings for that morning. First, he wanted to see the photographs himself. Looking over the photos Kennedy remarked, “They look like footballs on a football field.” The missiles he held in his



▲ A picture taken of an SS-4 missile on parade in Moscow. This is apparently a rare photo since few have been found.

sight had a range of 1100 miles and threatened major population centers in the U.S. including New York, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia. At this point, the missiles were not yet operational, nor were they fitted with nuclear warheads, but as Marshall Carter, Deputy Director of the CIA, so accurately assessed, “They soon would be.”

The second meeting of the day Kennedy scheduled for 11:45. He hand-picked a group of trusted government officials to advise him on the crisis. The assembled group was later referred to as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council or EX-COMM. (see link for a list of all the members) In that first meeting, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara outlined three possible courses of action for the U.S. to take against Cuba and the Soviet Union.

1. “The political course of action.” — To engage Castro and Khrushchev on the diplomatic stage in a gamble to resolve the crisis openly — an option which most members of EX-COMM deemed unlikely to succeed.
2. “A course of action that would involve declaration of open surveillance” combined with “a blockade against offensive weapons entering Cuba.”
3. “Military action directed against Cuba, starting with an air attack against the missiles,” and then followed by an invasion.



EX-COMM worked from the premise that the missile warheads were not yet in Cuba and not attached to the missiles. Therefore, the goal of any action they proposed was to stop the warheads from reaching Cuba or to prevent the missiles from becoming fully operational

A majority of the discussion that first day revolved around option number three and how the Soviets would respond. What EX-COMM didn't know was that the Soviet's did indeed have nuclear warheads on the island. They had also installed battlefield nuclear weapons in Cuba and were prepared to fire them to halt an invasion.

In taking a stance on Cuba, Kennedy wanted to appear tough yet avoid a military confrontation. No matter what action the U.S. took, EX-COMM expected Khrushchev to retaliate.

Maintaining Secrecy

Day 3: Wednesday, October 17

In order to maintain secrecy, Kennedy followed his planned schedule. As of yet, the Soviets didn't know the American's knew of the missiles in Cuba. The American public didn't know yet either. If the Soviets found out, they might hide the missiles or launch them if they were ready. If the public found out, the nation would panic. Consequently, Kennedy broke off no public engagements for the next four days.

On Wednesday, Kennedy flew to Connecticut to campaign for the Democratic Party and congressional candidate Abe Ribicoff. During the speech he was in a good mood and he even joked, but as soon as Kennedy entered his car to return to Washington he became serious. Every spare moment was spent concentrating on the crisis. Robert Kennedy and Theodore Sorensen met the President at the airport and filled him in on what he had missed during that day's deliberations.

Throughout EX-COMM's discussions, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and especially the Air Force strongly argued for an air strike. The Air Force suggested bombing Cuba with over 100 sorties, but Kennedy would ask, "How many bombs do you want and what do you want to bomb?" Before the Air Force was done, they had planned a massive air attack that would have wiped Cuba off the planet's surface.

After another U-2 flight on the night of the 17th, the military discovered intermediate range (IRBMs) SS-5 nuclear missiles. With the exception of Washington and Oregon, these missiles could reach all of the continental U.S.

Day 4: Thursday, October 18

"I don't know quite what kind of a world we live in after we've struck Cuba, and we've started it.... How do we stop at that point?"

-Robert McNamara

On October 18 Kennedy fulfilled a previously scheduled engagement to meet with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrie Gromyko. The meeting was a strange one. EX-COMM wasn't sure if Gromyko knew of the missiles or if he knew that the Americans knew, consequently Kennedy decided not to confront the minister on the issue.

The meeting began with a polite exchange over minor world events but soon shifted to Cuba. Gromyko read a statement to Kennedy saying that Soviet aid was "solely for the purpose of contributing to the defense capabilities of Cuba and to the development of its peaceful democracy. If it were otherwise, the Soviet government would have never become involved in rendering such assistance." In response Kennedy re-read a statement he had made on September 4 saying the U.S. would not tolerate offensive weapons in Cuba. Gromyko



must have wondered why Kennedy was reading him the statement, but when he later reported to Khrushchev he said all was well with the Americans. After the meeting Kennedy remarked to an advisor that he wanted to take the enlarged reconnaissance photographs out of his desk, point to the missiles, and ask Gromyko, "What do these look like?"

Later that evening, a black-tie dinner was held in Gromyko's honor. As the guests entered the State Department to attend the ball, EX-COMM was preparing to meet just one floor below.

During the discussion a majority opinion had been reached on recommending a blockade. Those with an opposing view continued to dissent but the majority group wanted to head to the White House to inform the president. Instead of attracting attention by arriving in a convoy of official black cars, Edwin Martin of the CIA walked the few blocks, and the rest, nine members in all, squeezed into Robert Kennedy's limousine for the short drive. On the way one member commented, "It will be some story if this car is in an accident."

At the White House, Kennedy liked the idea of the blockade because it provided the Soviets a way out of the crisis. But because EX-COMM still hadn't reached a consensus Kennedy instructed his

speech writer Theodore Sorensen to draft two different speeches to give to the American public on October 22: one announcing a blockade and the other announcing an air strike. Kennedy still hadn't decided on the best course of action.

Day 5: Friday, October 19

"I don't think we've got much time on these missiles."

-John F. Kennedy

Before leaving for a campaign trip to the Midwest Kennedy met with the Joint Chiefs, who still promoted the idea of air strikes. A consensus still couldn't be reached. Accordingly, Kennedy, who was already late, asked his brother to continue the EX-COMM meetings to draw up full plans for both scenarios. Again he chose not to cancel this trip because he wanted to maintain secrecy.

Decision

Day 6: Saturday, October 20

"The President may have to develop a cold tomorrow."

-Kenneth O'Donnell, Presidential Aide

On Saturday, with Kennedy still gone on the campaign trip, EX-COMM met to discuss the two speeches being prepared. They approved them with a few minor changes and then Robert Kennedy called the President to say that he had to come back to Washington. The President was reluctant to do so but he and Robert felt there should be a final consensus. It was necessary then, that he return and discuss with EX-COMM the two options: a "surgical" air strike or a quarantine. The President finally agreed. Canceling his trip by saying that he had an "upper respiratory infection," he returned to Washington.

Between 1:30 and 2:30 p.m. he met with EX-COMM. Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense, summed up Kennedy's choices: "Essentially, Mr. President, this is a choice between limited action and unlimited action — and most of us think it is better to start with limited action." The President liked the idea of a blockade be-



▲ Attorney General and close advisor Robert Kennedy

cause it allowed the U.S. to start with minimal action and increase the pressure on the Soviets as needed. Kennedy would not, however, finalize his decision until the next day.

Day 7: Sunday, October 21

On the 21st, Kennedy met with his top advisors to further discuss the missiles in Cuba. He asked General Walter Sweeney, the head of Strategic Air Command (SAC), if an air strike could destroy all the missiles. The General replied that they could take out all the missiles they knew about. Sweeney could not predict 100 percent success. Next, Kennedy asked the general how many casualties, civilian and military, would occur. The general responded, 10,000 to 20,000. The only reasonable option left was a blockade against Cuba.

In the speech Kennedy would give the nation, he would use the word “quarantine” instead of “blockade.” This suggestion, made by George Ball, Under Secretary of State, was an important one. A blockade, as defined under international treaties is an act of war. A quarantine, on the other hand, is merely an attempt to keep something unwanted out of a particular area. In sum, the U.S. could have its blockade but the international community would not consider it an act of war.

Later in the day, the press contacted Kennedy wanting to know about the situation in Cuba. The press knew that there were offensive weapons in Cuba and that Kennedy was preparing a plan to deal with the threat. Kennedy asked the reporters to remain quiet. He even personally telephoned *The Washington Post* and the *New York Times* to ask them to tone down their coverage of Cuba. He went on to warn that if he was denied the element of surprise, “I don’t know what the Soviets will do.”

Another U-2 flight that day revealed bombers and Migs being rapidly assembled and cruise missile sites being built on Cuba’s northern shore.

Kennedy Goes Public

Day 8: Monday, October 22

On Monday, preparations had to be made for Kennedy’s 7:00



▲ George Ball Under Secretary of State who came up with the idea of a blockade which help prevent a military confrontation with the Soviets

p.m. (EST) address to the nation; a flurry of activity ensued. The State Department informed American allies around the world of Kennedy's decision. U.S. Senate leaders were called to Washington for a special briefing. They came out of the briefing surprised and doubting the effectiveness of a quarantine — many wanted an air strike. Almost 300 Navy ships set sail, not yet having received the specific orders for a quarantine. In Guantanamo Bay, three Marine battalions were brought in to reinforce the base and military dependents were evacuated. Military alert was raised to DEFCON 3 and instructions were given to be ready to launch missiles within minutes of the President's speech. Twenty planes armed with nuclear bombs were also in the air ready to strike the U.S.S.R.

At 7:00 p.m., precisely as Kennedy was beginning his speech, jet fighters took off from bases in Florida and headed south towards Cuba. If Castro decided to respond militarily, they would be ready. For the next seventeen minutes, Americans and citizens around the world sat glued to their TV sets listening to the American President. An excerpt follows:



This government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military buildup on the island of Cuba. Within the past week unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere.

...I have directed that the following initial steps be taken: First, to halt this offensive build up, a strict quarantine of all military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. Second, I have directed the continued and increased close surveillance and it's military build up. Third, it shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response on the Soviet Union.

Earlier in the day, Kennedy had sent Khrushchev a copy his speech. Upon reading it, Khrushchev became infuriated. He was angry with his military for not successfully hiding the missiles and he was angered by the American "quarantine" which, no matter what

they called it, was an act of war. Khrushchev's first response was to instruct the ships on their way to Cuba not to stop. Later that night, Khrushchev sent a response to Kennedy:

I must say frankly that the measures indicated in your statement constitute a serious threat to peace and to the security of nations... We reaffirm that the armaments which are in Cuba, regardless of the classification to which they may belong, are intended solely for defensive purposes...

I hope the United States Government will display wisdom and renounce the actions pursued by you, which may lead to catastrophic consequences for world peace.

In response to Kennedy's speech Castro mobilized all of Cuba's military forces. The Cuban's, however, were not surprised by Kennedy, for the U.S. had constantly threatened them. Ever since the Bay of Pigs, eighteen months earlier, the Cuban's had been living under a constant fear of invasion. The crisis of October was little different from any other month.

The public phase had begun.

Eyeball to Eyeball

Day 9: Tuesday, October 23

On the 23rd Kennedy ordered six Crusader jets to fly a low level reconnaissance mission. The mission, flown at 350 feet and at 350 knots, brought back stunning close-up pictures of the missile sites and also showed that the Soviets were testing the missiles for launch. One of the pilots, William Ecker, commented that, "When you can almost see the writing on the side of the missiles then you really know what you've got."

On the same day, the Organization of American States (OAS) unanimously approved of the quarantine against Cuba. These countries realized that they were also threatened by the missiles in Cuba. With the backing of the Western Hemisphere, Kennedy signed the actual Proclamation of Interdiction in the early evening. The quarantine was to take effect at 10:00 a.m. (EST) on October 24. By the end of the day U.S. ships had taken up position along the quarantine line, 800 miles from Cuba. They were instructed to use force to halt any

ship that failed to stop at that line.

Late in the evening, the President sent Robert Kennedy to the Soviet embassy to talk with Ambassador Dobrynin. Well before the crisis, the administration had developed this channel of communication with the U.S.S.R. It allowed both countries to discuss matters privately and quietly. At 9:30 p.m. Robert Kennedy arrived at the embassy and proceeded to chastise the Soviet ambassador for having lied to the United States about placing missiles in Cuba. He responded, that as far as he knew, there were no offensive weapons there. As Robert Kennedy left the building, he held out his hand in despair and said, "I do not know how this will end." Shortly afterward, Dobrynin wrote a message summarizing the meeting to be cabled to Khrushchev. Because communications were still at an infant stage then, Dobrynin had to call a Western Union telegraph station in Washington, which sent a bike messenger to pick up the cable. Dobrynin recalls urging the messenger to travel back to the station with the utmost speed.

Back at the White House, the President decided to give Khrushchev more time and pulled the quarantine line back to 500 miles.

Day 10: Wednesday, October 24

On the 24th EX-COMM convened at 10:00 a.m. (EST), the exact time the blockade began. The mood was tense. Soviet ships kept coming closer and closer to the line. American ships were preparing to disable them if they did not stop. The order given to the American ships was to first communicate with the Soviet vessels; then if they did not stop, the American's were to fire across their bow, and, finally, if they still did not stop, American ships were instructed to blow off the rudder in order to stop the ships' forward progress.

Two of the major concerns during the EX-COMM meeting were the Soviet submarines accompanying the vessels and the possibility that Khrushchev had not had enough time to instruct the ship captains on what they should do. At 10:25 EX-COMM received a message that the Soviet ships were turning back. Everyone in the room breathed



▲ The Organization of American States (OAS) meets and votes on the Cuban Crisis.



▲ Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin a important secret go between in the crisis

a sigh of relief — Khrushchev was not ready to expand the crisis by challenging the blockade. Upon hearing the good news, Secretary of State Dean Rusk turned to McGeorge Bundy and said, “We’ve been eyeball to eyeball and the other fellow just blinked.” This did not mean, however, that the crisis was over.

Also on Wednesday, military alert was raised to DEFCON 2, the highest level ever in U.S. history. The notification, sent round the world from Strategic Air Command headquarters, was purposely left uncoded to let the Soviets know just how serious the Americans were. The military could, at a moments notice, launch an attack on Cuba or the Soviet Union.

That evening, the White House received a second letter from Khrushchev:

You, Mr. President, are not declaring a quarantine, but rather are advancing an ultimatum and threatening that if we do not give in to your demands you will use force.... No Mr. President, I cannot agree to this, and I think that in your own heart you recognize that I am correct. I am convinced that in my place you would act the same way.

Therefore the Soviet Government cannot instruct the captains of Soviet vessels bound for Cuba to observe the orders of the American naval forces blockading that Island.... Naturally we will not simply be bystanders with regard to piratical acts by American ships on the high seas. We will then be forced on our part to take the measures we consider necessary and adequate to protect our rights. We have everything necessary to do so.

The Ends of a Rope

Day 11: Thursday, October 25

“National security must come first...we can’t negotiate with a gun at our head... if they won’t remove the missiles and restore status quo ante, we will have to do it ourselves.”

-President John F. Kennedy

Tensions continued to build on Thursday with no resolution appearing any closer at hand. On the 23rd, U Thant, Secretary General of the United Nations, had proposed a pause in the crisis to



▲ Secretary of State
Dean Rusk



▲ EX-COMM member
McGeorge Bundy

Kennedy and Khrushchev. He suggested the Soviets stop shipping offensive weapons to Cuba for two or three weeks and in exchange the Americans would suspend the quarantine for the same length of time. On the 25th Kennedy politely turned down the offer because it allowed the Soviets to continue preparing the missiles that were already in Cuba.

Early in the morning, Khrushchev received another correspondence from Kennedy which restated the United State's position. Kennedy was not going to back down.

Still attempting to avoid war, Kennedy had U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson confront the Soviets at the United Nations. When asked directly about the missiles, Soviet Ambassador Zorin refused to comment. Consequently, Stevenson showed the reconnaissance photos of missile sites. Their effect was stunning, the photographs were unmistakable evidence of the Soviet presence in Cuba.



▲ Adlai Stevenson
U.S. Ambassador to
the U.N.

A syndicated column written by influential journalist Walter Lippman was also printed on Thursday. Lippman suggested a “face-saving” missile exchange. The Soviets would remove their missiles from Cuba and the Americans would remove their missiles from Turkey. Days before, EX-COMM had already begun to consider this option and was currently exploring the political consequences. Some government officials both in the United States and Soviet Union mistakenly interpreted Lippman's article as a trial balloon floated by the Kennedy administration. It was not.

In the Atlantic tensions were also running high. The Soviet tanker *Bucharest* approached the quarantine line and was let through because there was no reason to believe it carried contra-band cargo. To close the day, the aircraft carrier *USS Kennedy* neared the Lebanese freighter *Marcula*, which President Kennedy had chosen to be the first ship boarded by quarantine forces. The *USS Kennedy* radioed the *Marcula* that night to state it would be boarded the following morning.

At the close of the 5:00 p.m. EX-COMM meeting, CIA Director McCone indicated that some of the missiles deployed in Cuba were now fully operational.

▲ Adlai Stevenson
confronts the Soviets
and shows the world
the evidence of the
military build-up in
Cuba

Day 12: Friday, October 26

In the early morning, U.S. quarantine forces boarded the *Marcula*. After finding only paper products, they cleared the ship to Cuba.

During the 10:00 a.m. EX-COMM meeting, Kennedy said that he believed the quarantine alone could not force the Soviet government to remove its offensive weapons from Cuba. A CIA report from that morning stated that there was no halt in progress in the development of the missile sites and another reconnaissance flight revealed the Soviets were also attempting to camouflage the missiles. Kennedy believed that only an invasion or a trade (for missiles in Turkey) would now succeed. He also agreed to enhance pressure by increasing the frequency of low-level flights over Cuba from twice per day to once every two hours.



At lunch time on the 26th, Aleksandr Fomin, who was known to be the KGB station chief in Washington, requested a meeting with ABC News correspondent John Scali. At the Occidental Restaurant in Washington Fomin hinted that there might be a resolution. Fomin proposed the dismantling of Soviet bases under U.N. supervision in exchange for a public pledge from the U.S. not to invade Cuba. After lunch Scali went directly to the State Department to inform Roger Hilsman of the meeting. Since Fomin was a high ranking officer, the U.S. assumed the proposal was an official one from Khrushchev. Recent accounts from the Soviet side, however, suggest that Fomin's proposal was not in fact authorized by Moscow. Later in the day, Scali was sent back to Fomin with a message from Secretary of State Dean Rusk: "I have reason to believe that the U.S. government sees real possibilities and supposes that the representatives of the two governments in New York could work this matter out with U Thant and with each other. My impression is, however, that time is very urgent." Fomin assured Scali that he would convey the message to the "highest Soviet sources."

The most important occurrence on the 26th was not Fomin's message to Scali, but a letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy. The letter began to arrive at the White House at 6:00 p.m. but because it had to

be translated, it came in four separate parts, the last of which arrived at 9:00 p.m. The letter was clearly an impassioned appeal, written by Khrushchev himself, to resolve the crisis. Khrushchev proposed removing his missiles if Kennedy would publicly announce never to invade Cuba.

You and I should not now pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied a knot of war, because the harder you and I pull, the tighter the knot will become. And a time may come when this knot is tied so tight that the person who tied it is no longer capable of untying it, and then the knot will have to be cut. What that would mean I need not explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly what dread forces our two countries possess.

I propose we, for our part, will declare that our ships bound for Cuba are not carrying any armaments. You will declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its troops and will not support any other forces which might intend to invade Cuba. Then the necessity of the presence of our military specialists in Cuba will disappear.

Later that night, unknown to EX-COMM, Robert Kennedy again went to the Soviet Embassy to meet with Ambassador Dobrynin. When Dobrynin claimed Soviet missiles in Cuba were justified because of American missiles in Turkey, Kennedy offered to introduce the Turkish missiles into a potential settlement. Then, the Attorney General reportedly left the room to call his brother. When he returned he reported this to Dobrynin: “the president said that we are ready... to examine favorably the question of Turkey.” After the meeting, Dobrynin again cabled the Kremlin.



▲ Ambassador
Anatoly Dobrynin

On the Brink

Day 13: Saturday, October 27

“I thought I might never live to see another Saturday night.”

- Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara

Saturday was the worst day of the crisis. One U-2 was shot down, another flew off course over Russia, a low-level reconnaissance mission was shot at over Cuba, and a second, more demanding

letter was received from Khrushchev.

First, a U-2 on a “routine air sampling mission” over western Alaska picked the wrong star to navigate by and flew off course into Soviet airspace. When he realized his mistake, the pilot immediately radioed the for help. The operator was able to give him directions to turn his plane onto the right course. By that time, however, the Soviets had detected the U-2 and scrambled MiG fighters to intercept the spy plane. The Americans also scrambled their F-102 fighters to provide cover for the U-2. The F-102s, prepared for action, had been armed with nuclear tipped air-to-air missiles. Fortunately, the U-2 left Soviet air space in time and two fighter groups never met.

Upon hearing the news at the White House, Secretary of Defense McNamara “turned absolutely white, and yelled hysterically, ‘This means war with the Soviet Union.’” The Soviets, he feared, could have interpreted the flight as a reconnaissance mission precluding a nuclear strike. President Kennedy’s reaction was much more calm and controlled. He laughed slightly and remarked, “There is always some son of a [—] who doesn’t get the word.”

Next, around noon, news reached EX-COMM that a U-2 had been shot down over Cuba. Major Rudolph Anderson’s spy plane was hit by a surface-to-air missile and crashed in the island’s eastern jungle. EX-COMM interpreted the action as a planned escalation of the situation by the Kremlin. The order to launch the missile, however, did not come from Moscow. Rather, it was a Soviet commander in Cuba who gave the command. Khrushchev now worried that he had lost control of his forces.

EX-COMM had previously decided that if an American reconnaissance plane was downed, the Air Force would retaliate by bombing the offending site. Now that it had happened, the Joint Chiefs, who had been pressing for permission to bomb Cuba, pressed even harder. Secretary McNamara laid out the situation plain and simple:

“We must be in a position to attack quickly. We’ve been fired on today. We’re going to send surveillance aircraft in tomorrow. Those are going to be fired on without question. You can’t do this very long. You’re going to lose airplanes and will be shooting up Cuba quit a bit. We’re going to lose airplanes everyday. So you can’t just maintain this position very long. We must be prepared to attack Cuba quickly.”

General Taylor insisted that no “later than Monday morning, the 29th” the U.S. should strike Cuba. Kennedy chose not to attack,



▲ Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara a key dove in the crisis despite being a military leader. McNamara has publically stated that he doesn’t not believe in the use of nuclear weapons despite the US’s policy to use them in the event of a major war

but to wait and for another plane to be shot down. Then he would order the destruction of the SAM site. Years later, McGeorge Bundy, cited the two U-2 instances as “reminders that crisis managers don’t always manage everything.”

The next event in that long day was a low-level reconnaissance mission flown by six F8U-1P Crusader jets. Two of the jets aborted the mission early due to mechanical problems, but the remaining four continued on their course. As the fighters passed over the San Cristóbal and Sagua la Grande missile sites, Cuban ground forces shot at the planes with anti-aircraft guns and small arms. One plane was hit by a 37mm shell but, fortunately, it returned safely. Earlier in morning, Castro lost his nerve and ordered his troops to fire at American aircraft. With each new flight the American’s were gaining valuable information for an invasion Castro believed to be only 24 to 72 hours away.

A Pretty Good Spot

Fourth, at 11:03 a.m. a second letter from Khrushchev arrived over a White House ticker. This letter, formally written, was much more demanding. Some members of EX-COMM speculated that hardliners had pressured Khrushchev to take a more aggressive position. The letter was also publicly broadcast in order to reduce communication delays but the broadcast also raised the stakes. The two countries no longer had the luxury of private negotiations. Khrushchev wrote:

You are disturbed over Cuba. You say that this disturbs you because it is ninety miles by sea from the coast of the United States of America. But. . . you have placed destructive missile weapons, which you call offensive, in Turkey, literally next to us. . .

I therefore make this proposal: We are willing to remove from Cuba the means which you regard as offensive...Your representatives will make a declaration to the effect that the United States...will remove its analogous means from Turkey. . . . And after that, persons entrusted by the United Nations Security Council could inspect on the spot the fulfillment of the pledges made. . .

This letter sent EX-COMM reeling. Khrushchev’s previous proposal had not mentioned Turkey. Why did it do so now? Unknown to the entire committee was Robert Kennedy’s discussion with Am-



▲ General Maxwell Taylor a strong Hawk throughout the crisis by avocated using either air strikes or an invasion to remove the missiles from Cuba

bassador Dobrynin the night before. Neither of the Kennedy's had informed the committee about the meeting because of one reason: leaks. Too much information on the crisis had already been leaked to the press. Kennedy feared having someone go public with the Turkey proposal because it could potentially ruin his career. If the U.S. buckled under pressure and removed its missiles from Turkey, a NATO ally, the whole alliance could falter. A political enemy would have a field day holding Kennedy responsible for the Turkey proposal. One can sense the President's caution in suggesting the idea of a Turkey-for-Cuba missile trade in this transcript of an EX-COMM meeting.

JFK: He's (Khrushchev) got us in a pretty good spot here, because most people will regard this (the new letter) as not an unreasonable proposal, I'll just tell you that. In fact, in many ways—

Bundy (interrupts): But what most people, Mr. President?

JFK: I think you're going to find it very difficult to explain why we are going to take hostile military action in Cuba against these sites—what we've been thinking about—the thing that he's saying is, 'If you'll get yours out of Turkey, we'll get ours out of Cuba.' ...We can't very well invade Cuba with all it's toll when we could have gotten the missiles out by making a deal on the same missiles in Turkey. If that's part of the record I don't see how we'll have a very good war.

Kennedy was frustrated even more by the fact that he had wanted to remove the old, unreliable Jupiter missiles months before the crisis. Furthermore, Cuban missiles were not on par with Turkish missiles. The strategic value of the missiles in Cuba was immensely larger than the strategic value of the missiles in Turkey. Now Khrushchev wanted to make a public display of having the Jupiters removed.

The President was stuck. Dreading conflict, he couldn't demand more of Khrushchev. Fearing political pressure at home, he couldn't give in on the question of Jupiter missiles in Turkey. Then, Robert Kennedy had an inspiration: why not ignore the second letter and respond only to the first? A long-shot, but it might work suggested Soviet specialist Llewellyn Thompson. To Kennedy, it seemed the only viable option left. Consequently, the President had Robert Kennedy and Theodore Sorenson draft a response. In forty-five minutes they returned to the meeting. The committee then edited the proposal and approved it.



▲ Theodore Sorenson

The Secret Deal

After the meeting adjourned, Kennedy called six men into the Oval Office — McNamara, Robert Kennedy, Bundy, Rusk, Thompson, and Sorensen for further consultation. The President informed them of the Attorney General's meeting with Ambassador Dobrynin on the previous evening and asked for more suggestions on how to use this precious channel of communication. The group agreed to have the Attorney General meet with Dobrynin again to orally reinforce the proposal. Secretary Rusk also suggested that Robert Kennedy propose a secret deal on the Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

At 7:45 that evening, Dobrynin came to the Justice Department to meet with the Attorney General. Kennedy handed him a copy of the reply to Khrushchev's letter and then informed him of the secret deal. He gave assurances that the U.S. would quietly remove the Jupiters a few months after the crisis but warned they could not be part of a public deal. Robert Kennedy also imposed an ultimatum to Dobrynin. "If you do not remove those bases, we would remove them." He concluded by saying a Soviet commitment was needed by tomorrow. Immediately after the meeting Dobrynin cabled Khrushchev to tell him of the proposal and that the Attorney General had imposed a deadline for a response. The Soviets just didn't know what that deadline was.

Meanwhile, at the request of Secretary Rusk, John Scali met once again with Aleksandar Fomin. Rusk wanted Scali to find out why Khrushchev had suddenly introduced the Jupiter missiles into the deal. When Scali met Fomin in an empty ballroom at the Statler Hotel, he exploded. Why, Scali demanded, had Khrushchev performed a "flip-flop?" In response, Fomin muttered something about "poor communications." Scali, not satisfied with the answer, then accused Khrushchev of performing a "stinking double-cross." The ABC News correspondent, in the heat of the moment, then gave a warning he had no right in making: "American invasion of Cuba is only hours away," said Scali. Fomin was deeply impressed by the statement. After the two parted ways he hurried back to the Soviet embassy to report the latest news to Khrushchev, while Scali wrote a memorandum summing up the encounter for EX-COMM.

At 8:05 p.m. Kennedy released his response to Khrushchev's latest proposal. It was given to the press to avoid any communications delays.

As I read your letter, the key elements of your proposals—which seem generally acceptable as I understand them—are as follows:

1. You would agree to remove these weapon systems from Cuba under appropriate United Nations observation and supervision; and undertake, with suitable safe-guards, to halt the further introduction of such weapon systems into Cuba.
2. We, on our part, would agree—upon the establishment of adequate arrangements through the United Nations, to ensure the carrying out and continuation of these commitments (a) to remove promptly the quarantine measures now in effect and (b) to give assurances against the invasion of Cuba.

In case Khrushchev did not accept the terms of the agreement, Kennedy and Rusk drew up a contingency plan for publicly announcing a Turkey-for-Cuba missile trade. Late in the evening the two secretly contacted Andrew Cordier, a former U.N. undersecretary and friend of Rusk, in New York. Rusk dictated a statement to Cordier that called for an open missile trade. If he received the correct signal from Washington, Cordier was suppose to deliver the statement to Secretary General U Thant, who would in turn make it public.

McGeorge Bundy later likened the evening of the 27th to a tight chess match. The U.S. had made its move he said. It was now up to Khrushchev to make his. Until then, the U.S. could only hope and wait. “We had not abandoned hope,” Robert Kennedy said, “but what hope there was now rested with Khrushchev... It was a hope, not an expectation. The expectation was a military confrontation by Tuesday (October 30) and possibly tomorrow.”

Day 14: Sunday, October 28

Early in the morning, Khrushchev met with a circle of his advisers outside of Moscow. During the night he had received statements from both Dobrynin and Fomin, so he was aware how serious the crisis had become. At the opening of the meeting it got worse. A general entered and read a statement he had just received that Kennedy was going to make an address to the nation at 5:00 p.m. At that point, Khrushchev feared the worst. That address could be the announcement that an invasion was already underway. Khrushchev was not prepared to start a war, therefore he and his advisors drafted a letter with the utmost urgency. Upon completion, the letter was rushed at full speed to the broadcasting station. Khrushchev hoped the message

would reach Kennedy before 5:00 p.m.

Esteemed Mr. President:

I have received your message of October 27, 1962. I express my satisfaction and gratitude for the sense of proportion and understanding of the responsibility borne by you at present for the preservation of peace throughout the world...

In order to complete with greater speed the liquidation of the conflict... the Soviet Government... in addition to previously issued instructions on the cessation of further work at building sites for the weapons, has issued a new order on the dismantling of the weapons which you describe as "offensive," and their crating.

The message, received at 9:00 a.m. (EST), effectively ended the crisis. The reaction among the EX-COMM members was mixed. Most were relieved, but others, especially the Joint Chiefs dubbed the announcement a ploy by Khrushchev to buy more time. General Curtis LeMay suggested that the United States "go in and make a strike on Monday anyway." Kennedy, on the other hand, knew the response was genuine. Almost immediately he drafted a response, which was broadcast over the Voice of America:

I welcome Chairman Khrushchev's statesmanlike decision to stop building bases in Cuba, dismantling offensive weapons and returning them to the Soviet Union. . . I think that you and I, with our heavy responsibilities for the maintenance of peace, were aware that developments were approaching a point where events could have become unmanageable. So I welcome this message and consider it an important contribution to peace.

At 11:00 a.m. Ambassador Dobrynin arrived at the Justice Department to extend Khrushchev's best wishes the Attorney General and the President. EX-COMM also ordered a halt to all reconnaissance flights on the 28th. In the afternoon Dean Rusk held a press conference and cautioned against gloating over the Soviet decision. "If there is a debate, a rivalry, a contest going on in the Kremlin over how to play this situation," Rusk warned, "we don't want...to strengthen the hands of those in Moscow who wanted to play this another way." The Secretary of State also pointed out that because of inspection issues and the IL-28 bomber question the crisis was still not settled.

In Cuba, Castro was furious. Khrushchev had not had time to inform his ally of the decision, so Castro learned about the agreement over the radio. Hours later, and still immensely angry, Castro countered the agreement by saying a true solution would have included five more points: (1) an end to the economic blockade against Cuba; (2) an end to all subversive activities carried out from the United States against Cuba; (3) a halt to all attacks on Cuba carried out from the U.S. military bases on the island of Puerto Rico; (4) the cessation of aerial and naval reconnaissance flights in Cuban airspace and waters; (5) and the return of Guantanamo naval base to Cuba.

A Public Withdrawal

“You accuse me of pulling out our missiles. What do you mean, that we should have started a war over them?”

-Premier Khrushchev to the Soviet Presidium

Crisis tensions eased on Sunday, October 28, but the ordeal was not yet over. The two superpowers still had to hammer out the terms of a formal agreement. During the course of the final negotiations Castro, who felt betrayed by Khrushchev, tried to halt the removal and inspection of the missiles. Eventually, with the help of the U.N., Castro backed down and the two sides reached an agreement. A U.N. inspection team was assigned to monitor the removal of the missiles and the demolition of the missile bases in Cuba. Then, the Soviet Navy shipped the missiles back to the U.S.S.R. The missiles were sent back on the decks of the ships so that American reconnaissance planes could count the missiles and make sure that all had been removed.

One stumbling block of the agreement was the removal of IL-28 “Beagle” medium-range bombers. Aware of the larger problem at hand, EX-COMM had decided to let this minor issue slide during previous negotiations. In Khrushchev’s letter of the 28th, however, he stated the Soviets would remove all “weapons which you describe as offensive.” With that statement, the U.S. was able to successfully argue for the removal of the bombers. Beginning on November 20, the planes were finally dismantled and returned the U.S.S.R. The next day, November 21, Kennedy formally ended the quarantine and lowered Strategic Command’s Defense Condition from DEFCON 2 to



▲ The Soviets display the removed missiles on deck.

DEFCON 4.

Conclusion

“Having come so close to the edge, we must make it our business not to pass this way again.”

-National Security Advisor, McGeorge Bundy

Looking back on the crisis, Robert McNamara claims the world was one step away from nuclear war. That step he said, was the President ordering the invasion of Cuba. What the military didn't know then was that they had grossly underestimated Soviet and Cuban force strength. Military intelligence calculated 10,000 Soviet troops on the island plus an additional 100,000 Cubans. We now know that the actual numbers were much higher. The Soviets had 43,000 combat-ready soldiers and Castro had mobilized 270,000 Cubans to fight. Plans for the American invasion called for a first day air strike consisting of 1080 sorties and an amphibious landing of 180,000 troops. Those troops would have been surprised by the strength of the resistance they found on the island. Had Kennedy gone ahead with the invasion, casualties on both sides would have been much higher.

Furthermore, EX-COMM was also unaware of the tactical nuclear weapons stationed along Cuba's shore. Khrushchev had also given a standing order to his generals that if he couldn't be reached in the event of an invasion, they had the authority to launch the battlefield nuclear weapons. If Kennedy had invaded, the outnumbered Soviets would have used their nuclear weapons and then Kennedy would have had no choice but to retaliate with American nuclear devices. The response would likely have been an attack on Soviet soil.

Perhaps the scariest part of the Cuban Missile Crisis was the lack of a reliable form of communication between Washington and Moscow. It could take up to seven hours to transmit a message from one capitol to the other. Imagine this: Khrushchev agrees to pull out his missiles, writes a letter, but it is delayed in transit. In the time it takes for the letter to reach Washington, Kennedy orders the invasion because Khrushchev took too long to reply. Once an invasion had started, it would be nearly impossible for the United States to pull out. As a result of the crisis, a hot line was established between the Kremlin and the White House so that the two world leaders could

communicate directly. Neither side wanted to risk starting another nuclear war over poor communications.

Nine months after the crisis ended, Kennedy and Khrushchev signed an agreement to ban nuclear testing in the atmosphere. This marked the beginning of what seemed to be a new willingness to cooperate and communicate. However, on November 22nd, 1963 President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Eleven months later Premier Khrushchev was removed from office by communist hard liners. One can't help but wonder what would have happened if these two men had stayed in power. Perhaps the same two people who brought us so close to nuclear war, now changed by that experience, could have brought us far from it.

Site References

Primary Sources

Kennedy, Robert F., *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis*.
New York: 1969.

Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General and the President's brother, played a large role in the crisis. His memoirs are important because they give a high level first hand account of what was going on.

Khrushchev, Nikita. Letter to President Kennedy. Received Oct. 25 1962.
via the Internet

Nikita Khrushchev, former Premier of the Soviet Union, wrote this letter to President Kennedy saying a compromise could be reached. This letter is important to our project because it gave us direct access to what Khrushchev had said and it was the turning point in the crisis so it is essential to have.

Knox, William E., *Close-up of Khrushchev during a Crisis*, *The New York Times Magazine*, November 18, 1962.

This article gave us an idea of what Khrushchev was thinking and doing during the crisis.

Nightline. Hosted by Cokie Roberts. Produced and Directed by ABC. WXOW.
La Crosse. December 20, 1994.

This program contained recently released tapes of the meeting had with Senate leaders on October 22, 1962. In this we learned that the Senators

were strongly for an invasion of Cuba and felt that Kennedy was wrong in ordering a blockade.

One Minute to Midnight. Narrated by Maria Shriver. Produced by Alexandra Gleysteen, Directed by Sid Feders NBC. WEAU. Eau Claire. October 23, 1962.

This program was aired after the fall of the Soviet Union and the opening of Cuba. Therefore, it contained never before seen interviews and was also able to show what the Soviets and Cubans were doing during the crisis. This video was very important because it contained live interviews with Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk, Theodore Sorenson, Pierre Salinger, Sergei Khrushchev, and Fidel Castro, among others. This allowed us to get direct quotes from high level officials which would have been nearly impossible otherwise.

The Missiles of October. Narrated by Peter Jennings. Produced by Sherry Jones. Directed by Foster Wiley. ABC. WXOW. La Crosse. October 1962.

This program, produced by ABC, was aired at a similar time. It contains everything mentioned about the NBC video but offered a slightly different perspective and showed different video segments. We were also able to get live footage from the time of the crisis which we used in our site.

Scali, John, I Was the Secret Go-Between in the Cuban Crisis, Family Weekly, October 25, 1964.

John Scali was a respected report of ABC at the time. He maintained close contacts with many leaders in Washington including some from the Kremlin. The Kremlin first contacted him on how a compromise could be reached. This article gave us some further insight into the minute details of the compromise.

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Blight, James and Welch, David. On the Brink. Toronto. Collins Publishers, 1989.

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Again this book provided good background information. It also helped clarify some vague sections and motivations of the crisis.

Thompson, Robert Smith. *Missiles of October*. New York. Simon & Schuster, 1992

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Wyden, Peter. *Bay of Pigs the Untold Story*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979